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*The Art of
Optimism*



W. De Witt Hyde

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FROM THE ESTATE OF
FRANCIS GREENWOOD PEABODY

Overseer, Lecturer,
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Dean, Professor Emeritus

1877-1936

THE
ART OF OPTIMISM

AS TAUGHT BY

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

WILLIAM DEWITT HYDE

President of Bowdoin College



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THE ART OF OPTIMISM

AS TAUGHT BY ROBERT BROWNING

THE world we live in is a world of mingled good and evil. Whether it is chiefly good or chiefly bad depends on how we take it. To look at the world in such a way as to emphasize the evil is the art of pessimism. To look at it in such a way as to bring out the good, and throw the evil into the background, is the art of optimism. The facts are the same in either case. It is simply a question of perspective and emphasis. Whether we shall be optimists or pessimists depends partly on temperament, but chiefly on will. If you are happy it is largely to your own credit. If you are miserable it is chiefly your own fault. I propose to show you both pessimism and optimism; give a prescription for each, and leave you to take whichever you like best: for whether you are a pessimist or an optimist does n't depend on whether the world is wholly good or wholly bad, or whether you have a hard lot or an easy one. It depends on what you like, and what you want, and what you resolve to be. Perchance you are the most fortunate and happy person among my readers. There are thousands of people who would be miserable were they situated precisely as you are. They would make themselves miserable, because that is their temperament; that is their way of looking at things. And even in your happy and enviable con-

dition, with all your health and wealth, and hosts of friends, and abundance of interests, they would find plenty of stuff to make their misery out of. On the other hand, you may be the person of all others among my readers who has the hardest time, who has lost dearest friends, who has the severest struggle with poverty, who has worst enemies, who meets cruelest unkindness, who seems to have least to live for. Thousands of people would be supremely happy if they were in precisely your circumstances. Life is like the ocean. It drowns one man, because he yields to it passively and blindly. It buoys up the other because he strikes it skilfully, and buffets it with lusty sinews.

There is enough that is bad in every life to make one miserable who is so inclined. We all know people who have plenty to eat, a roof over their heads, a soft bed to lie in, money in the bank to cover all probable needs for the rest of their days, plenty of friends, good social position, an unbroken family circle, good education, even the profession of some sort of religion; who yet by magnifying something that happened to them a long while ago; or something that may happen to them at some time to come; or what somebody has said about them; or the work they have to do; or the slight some one has shown them, or even without anything as definite as even these trifles, contrive to make themselves and everybody else perpetually wretched and uncomfortable. These people have acquired the art of pessimism.

The material which both pessimists and optimists build their theories out of is precisely the same. The fundamental fact at the basis of both theories is this: The universe is infinite; we are finite. Therefore the little piece of the universe that we can bite off in any partic-

ular mouthful, and call our own at any given time, is, in comparison to what remains unappropriated, very small. Hence we are never content with what we have, but are always striving for something beyond our reach. The moment anything is gained it ceases to satisfy, and we crave still the unattained. In other words, a satisfied desire is a contradiction in terms. If you desire you are not satisfied. If you are satisfied you no longer desire. But since life without desire would be not life, but death, therefore unsatisfied desire is the characteristic feature of human life. That is the common fact out of which both pessimism and optimism are constructed. Dwell on the impossibility of ever getting a state of complete and permanent satisfaction with what you have, and you become a pessimist. Dwell on the opportunity for endless growth and conquest which this same fact makes possible, and you become an optimist. In a word, live in the passive voice, waiting for good to come to you ready-made, and you will be a pessimist, miserable to the end of your days. Live in the active voice, intent on the progress you can make and the work you can accomplish, and you will acquire the art of optimism, and be happy forevermore.

This common root of pessimism and optimism in the impossibility of perfectly satisfied desire is well set forth in Carlyle's "*Sartor Resartus*": "Man's unhappiness, as I construe, comes of his greatness; it is because there is an infinite in him, which with all his cunning he cannot quite bury under the finite. Will the whole finance ministers, and upholsterers, and confectioners of modern Europe undertake, in joint-stock company, to make one shoeblack happy? They cannot accomplish it, above an hour or two: for the shoeblack also has a soul quite

other than his stomach ; and would require, if you consider it, for his permanent satisfaction and saturation, simply this allotment, no more, and no less : God's infinite universe altogether to himself, therein to enjoy infinitely, and fill every wish as fast as it rose. Try him with half a universe, he sets to quarrelling with the proprietor of the other half, and declares himself the most maltreated of men. Always there is a black spot in our sunshine : it is the shadow of ourselves."

In the simple life of primitive communities these facts of the fleeting and unsatisfying nature of all objects of human desire, and the greatness of the soul that can rise above it all, lie side by side in unreconciled opposition. That is what gives the inimitable pathos to the literature of primitive peoples ; and to the folk-songs as we find them in unsophisticated communities to-day. In these conditions you get neither optimism nor pessimism ; but the material out of which both are made. I could hardly give a better example of this than in the Roumanian folk-songs, which Carmen Sylva has translated for us under the title "The Bard of the Dimbovitza." Here you see together in the same poems the material out of which more reflective minds would build either an optimism or a pessimism ; but which these simple people, who take the bitter and the sweet as they come, present in native simplicity.

I will take first a subject from nature, entitled "Hay," and then a human theme, the soldier's fate, in a little poem entitled "I Am Content." In each of them you will perceive the unsatisfied finite desire, which is the material of pessimism ; and the nobleness of the loving heart and will, which is the spring and source of all true optimism. Each of these poems, like all in the collec-

tion, begins and ends with a refrain which gives the emotional key in which the whole song is written.

“HAY.

“Yesterday’s flowers am I,
And I have drunk my last sweet draught of dew.
Young maidens came and sang me to my death ;
The moon looks down and sees me in my shroud,
The shroud of my last dew.

“Yesterday’s flowers, that are yet in me
Must needs make way for all to-morrow’s flowers.
The maidens, too, that sang me to my death
Must even so make way for all the maids
That are to come.

And as my soul, so too their soul will be
Laden with fragrance of the days gone by.
The maidens that to-morrow come this way
Will not remember that I once did bloom,
For they will only see the new-born flowers.
Yet will my perfume-laden soul bring back,
As a sweet memory, to women’s hearts

Their days of maidenhood.

And then they will be sorry that they came
To sing me to my death.

And all the butterflies will mourn for me ;
I bear away with me

The sunshine’s dear remembrance, and the low
Soft murmurs of the spring.

My breath is sweet as children’s prattle is ;
I drank in all the whole earth’s fruitfulness,
To make of it the fragrance of my soul
That shall outlive my death.

Now to the morrow's flowers will I say :

‘ Dear children of my roots !

I charge you, love the sun as I have loved,
And love the lovers, and the little birds,
That when ye bloom anew,
They never may remember I am dead,
But always think they see the self-same flowers ;
Even as the sun that ever thinks he sees
The self-same birds and lovers upon earth,
Because he is immortal, and for this
Never remembers Death.’

“ Yesterday’s flowers am I,
And I have drunk my last sweet draught of dew.
Young maidens came and sang me to my death ;
The moon looks down and sees me in my shroud,
The shroud of my last dew.”

“ ‘ I AM CONTENT.’

*“ A spindle of hazelwood had I ;
Into the mill-stream it fell one day —
The water has brought it me back no more.*

“ As he lay a-dying, the soldier spake :

‘ I am content !

Let my mother be told in the village there,
And my bride in the hut be told,
That they must pray with folded hands,
With folded hands for me.’
The soldier is dead — and with folded hands,
His bride and his mother pray.
On the field of battle they dug his grave,

And red with his life-blood the earth was dyed,
The earth they laid him in.
The sun looked down on him there and spake :
 ‘ I am content.’
And flowers bloomed thickly upon his grave,
And were glad they blossomed there.

And when the wind in the tree-tops roared,
The soldier asked from the deep, dark grave :
 ‘ Did the banner flutter then ?’
‘ Not so, my hero,’ the wind replied,
‘ The fight is done, but the banner won,
Thy comrades of old have borne it hence,
 Have borne it in triumph hence.’
Then the soldier spake from the deep, dark grave :
 ‘ I am content.’
And again he heard the shepherds pass
And the flocks go wand’ring by,
And the soldier asked : ‘ Is the sound I hear
The sound of the battle’s roar ?’
And they all replied : ‘ My hero, nay !
Thou art dead and the fight is o’er,
Our country joyful and free.’
Then the soldier spake from the deep, dark grave :
 ‘ I am content.’
Then he heareth the lovers, laughing, pass,
And the soldier asks once more :
 ‘ Are these not the voices of them that love,
That love — and remember me ?’
‘ Not so, my hero,’ the lovers say,
‘ We are those that remember not ;

For the spring has come and the earth has smiled,
And the dead must be forgot.'
Then the soldier spake from the deep, dark grave:
'I am content.'

*"A spindle of hazelwood had I
Into the mill-stream it fell one day —
The water has brought it me back no more."*

In such poems as these we have reflected the common source far up among the hills of primitive human experience, whence both the two opposing streams of pessimism and optimism proceed. The grass must wither; the flower must fade; the soldier must die and be forgotten. That is the raw material of pessimism. Yet even the hay and the wilted flowers, clothed as they are here in human attributes, manifest the power to care lovingly for what will come after them; the soldier in the deep, dark grave is content in the gladness of a life he has helped to make possible, but in which he cannot individually share. That is the root of all brave optimism; the pledge of a noble immortality. Yet here on the simple page of the peasant-poet they lie unreconciled.

A more reflective age cannot leave these two elements — the unsatisfied individual desires, and the devotion to universal ends — side by side in this simple, unreflecting fashion. The modern poet cannot be satisfied to call the game a draw. He must make one or the other of the two principles supreme. The pessimist seizes the unsatisfied desire; emphasizes that element until it stands for the whole, or the chief feature of human experience. That, of course, is the trick which

Schopenhauer knows how to play upon us so cleverly. He tells us: "We feel pain, but not painlessness. We feel the wish as we feel hunger and thirst; but as soon as it has been fulfilled it is like the mouthful that has been swallowed; for only pain and want can be felt positively, and therefore announce themselves; well-being, on the other hand, is merely negative. Happiness always lies in the future, or else in the past, and the present may be compared to a small dark cloud which the wind drives over the sunny plain: before and behind it all is bright, only it itself always casts a shadow. The present is therefore always insufficient; but the future is uncertain, and the past is irrevocable."

Matthew Arnold in English literature is the great high-priest of this pessimistic creed. He is artful above all others to seize the melancholy aspect of human experience, as of moonlight on Mount Auburn tombstones, and make that represent the whole. As a connecting link between the naïve simplicity of the peasant-poet and the ringing optimism of Browning, we must have a few lines from this bewitching pessimist. The shortest and in some respects the best poem of this mood is

"DOVER BEACH.

"The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; — on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd sand,

Listen ! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles, which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

“Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the *Ægæan*, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery ; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

“The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

“Ah, love, let us be true
To one another ! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain ;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

In "Empedocles," to quote merely a few scattered lines, we are told :

"Thou hast no right to bliss,
No title from the gods to welfare and repose."

"But we are all the same — the fools of our own woes."

"In vain our pent wills fret,
And would the world subdue.
Limits we did not set,
Condition all we do."

"To tunes we did not call our being must keep chime."

"The world is what it is, for all our dust and din."

"The ill deeds of other men make often our life dark."

Again in "A Summer Night" —

"For most men in a brazen prison live,
Where, in the sun's hot eye,
With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
Their lives to some unmeaning task work give,
Dreaming of nought beyond their prison wall.
And as, year after year,
Fresh products of their barren labor fall
From their tired hands, and rest
Never yet comes more near,
Gloom settles down slowly over their breast.
And while they try to stem
The waves of mournful thought by which they are
 prest
Death in their prison reaches them,
Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest."

There is pessimism for you, embellished by the art of its most gifted poet. Theoretically there is a good deal to be said for it. As Mr. Bradley puts it, "Pessimism is the doctrine that in a world where everything is bad it is good to know the worst." Practically, anybody can be a pessimist who wants to. The art is easily acquired. Here are the rules for it.

Live in the passive voice; intent on what you can get, rather than on what you can do: in the subjunctive mood; meditating on what might be, rather than what actually is: in the past or future tense; either harping on what has been or worrying about what will be, rather than facing the facts of the present: in the third person; finding fault with other people instead of setting your own affairs in order: in the plural number; following the standards of respectability of other people rather than your own perception of what is fit and proper.

Keep these rules faithfully, always measuring the worth of life in terms of personal pleasure, rather than in terms of growth of character or service of high ends, and you will be a pessimist before you know it. For pessimism is the logical and inevitable outcome of that way of looking at life.

A sound optimism accepts with open eyes all the hard facts on which pessimism builds. Enjoyment is fleeting. Nothing can permanently satisfy us. As Browning said to an artist who complained that he was so dissatisfied with what he had done, "But think, if you were satisfied, how little you would be satisfied with!" Optimism proclaims this very incapacity of ours to be satisfied with anything finite, the glory of our nature, the promise and potency of our progress and development, the assurance of our immortality. If good is satisfied feeling,

which is to be given to us ready-made, then indeed we shall never get it, and pessimism is the ultimate truth. If good is a state of eager and enthusiastic activity of will, then this world of ours is just the best place imaginable to give field for this activity.

Of course the classic presentation of this active root of a robust optimism. that turns all evil into the means of the increased activity and victory of good is, in the familiar lines from Rabbi Ben Ezra :

“ Poor vaunt of life indeed,
Were man but formed to feed
On joy, to solely seek, and find, and feast ;
Such feasting ended, then
As sure an end to men ;
Irks care the cropful bird ? Frets doubt the maw-
crammed beast ?

“ Rejoice we are allied
To That which doth provide
And not partake, effect and not receive !
A spark disturbs our clod ;
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must be-
lieve.

“ Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth’s smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go !
Be our joys three parts pain !
Strive, and hold cheap the strain ;
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge
the throe.

“For thence, — a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks, —
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’
the scale.”

The same essential idea, that man’s true life is one not of fixed and final attainment, but of activity and growth, finds expression in the “Death in the Desert,” where he

“Finds progress man’s distinctive mark alone,
Not God’s, and not the beast’s; God is, they are,
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.
Such progress could no more attend his soul
Were all it struggles after found at first,
Than motion wait his body, were all else
Than it the solid earth on every side.
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.”

Of course, when one talks in this general way about “welcoming rebuffs,” and “joys that are three parts pain,” the retort is sure to come: “This is all very fine to talk about; but you don’t know anything about what real suffering is; you haven’t had such a hard time as I have.” Well, talk is cheap; and optimistic talk by people who have known no sorrow is the cheapest talk of all. But Browning, as an artist at any rate, knows evil and faces it. His characters are made to drink it to its very dregs. In his greatest book his greatest character, Pompilia, is surely a woman of sorrows and

acquainted with grief, if ever woman was. Her mother was a poor disreputable creature, who bore her in "poverty, pain, shame, and disease at once."

"My father, he was no one, any one, —
The worse, the likelier, — call him, — he who came,
Was wicked for his pleasure, went his way,
And left no trace to track by; there remained
Nothing but me, the unnecessary life."

She was adopted by a vain and foolish woman who passed her for her own that she might thereby gain an inheritance to which if childless she would not be entitled. She was married at thirteen to a brute she did not know and could not love, just to please this foolish woman who had adopted her.

"Here marriage was the coin, a dirty' piece
Would purchase me the praise of those I loved.
So hardly knowing what a husband meant,
I supposed this or any man would serve,
No whit the worse for being so uncouth."

The husband, who had married her for her dowry, quarrels with the poor girl's foster parents, when he finds the dowry less than he supposed, and finally they are driven away; and the poor Pompilia is left alone with the hateful, cruel husband. For three years she remains the victim of his brutality and abuse; all that should be sweetness and love turned into bitterness and hate. She is exposed to the rudeness and insult of a leering, licentious brother-in-law. Then when the parents in revenge declare the truth about her, and cut off the dowry from her husband,

"He must needs retaliate, — wrong,
Wrong, and all wrong, better say, all blind.
I was the chattel that had caused a crime."

"All bound to do me good, did harm."

The husband laid snares to bring her into compromising connection with a young priest. After resisting all his forged importunities, she finally in despair summons this priest to help her escape; is caught with him, and finally is brutally murdered, at the age of seventeen, by her husband. Two weeks before her death she bears a child; yet even her child she cannot have.

"I thought, when he was born,
Something began for once that would not end,
Forevermore, eternally quite mine.
But yet they bore him off
The third day, lest my husband should lay traps
And catch him, and by means of him catch me."

Here surely you have plenty of real evil. A young woman deceived, cheated, abused, persecuted, tormented, sneered at by the holy church to which in her despair she fled for help; the source of sorrow to her friends and enemies alike; an "unnecessary life," with every instinct of womanhood outraged; deprived of her child; her one purest and holiest personal relation misinterpreted, and construed as the foulest crime; murdered at last. Surely no one can rise up and say this poor Pompilia had not known sorrow such as I. Yet Pompilia triumphs; and dies serene. The bad past is to her "one blank, over and ended; a terrific dream."

"It is the good of dreams — so soon they go.
Wake in a horror of heart-beats, you may —
Cry, 'The dread thing will never from my thoughts!'
Still, a few daylight doses of plain life,
Cock-crow and sparrow-chirp, or bleat and bell
Of goats that trot by, tinkling, to be milked;
And when you rub your eyes awake and wide,
Where is the harm o' the horror? Gone! So here.
I know I wake, — but from what? Blank, I say!
This is the note of evil: for good lasts."

She interprets all the wrong she suffered as blindness;
blindness of well-meaning love in her foster-mother;
blindness of ignorance in herself; blindness of hate, in
her husband, for "hate was the truth of him."

"Being right now, I am happy and color things.
Yes, everybody that leaves life sees all
Softened and bettered: so with other sights:
To me at least was never evening yet
But seemed far beautifuller than its day,
For past is past."

Her life goes out in courage, born of love to her noble
rescuer; she is serene, triumphant, hopeful, blessed.

"Could we by a wish
Have what we will and get the future now,
Would we wish aught done undone in the past?"

For her lover she leaves the cheerful, heroic words:

"So let him wait God's instant men call years;
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,

Do out the duty ! Through such souls alone
God, stooping, shows sufficient of His light
For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise."

The art of optimism, you see, lies in laying all emphasis, not on what has happened to us, or is to happen, but on some end and aim which runs through all our experience, and gives to our activity a worthy goal, and to ourselves abundant exercise and growth.

"I count life just a stuff

To try the soul's strength on, educe the man.

Who keeps one end in view makes all things serve,"

as we are told "In a Balcony." And again this secret of optimism is beautifully set forth in that great passage from "Colombe's Birthday," which is perhaps the best single expression of Browning's point of view :

"He gathers earth's whole good into his arms ;
Standing as man now, stately, strong, and wise,
Marching to fortune, not surprised by her.
One great aim, like a guiding star, above —
Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness, to lift
His manhood to the height that takes the prize ;
A prize not near — lest overlooking earth
He rashly spring to seize it — nor remote,
So that he rests upon his path content.
But day by day, while shimmering grows shine,
And the faint circlet prophesies the orb,
He sees so much as, just evolving these,
The stateliness, the wisdom, and the strength,
To due completion, will suffice this life,
And lead him at his grandest to the grave."

What is this but the old doctrine, first clearly enunciated in Aristotle's *Ethics*, that man is essentially an active being; and that his only satisfaction is to be found in the harmonious development of all his powers in due proportion. To realize the proper end of one's being, and to find one's joy in ever closer approximation to the unattainable ideal; this is what in abstract form Aristotle taught the philosophic few in antiquity; this is the lesson Browning is drawing in a multitude of characters and situations, so that all who care enough for the truth about life to dig for it underneath the difficulty of his writings, may read and understand.

Yet not every end will satisfy. As we are told in Browning's earlier poems, not the "principle of restlessness," as in "*Pauline*," not knowledge alone, as in "*Paracelsus*," not intensity of action, apart from some human good served and attained, as in "*Sordello*," is sufficient to meet the demand of the soul for an end as great as itself.

Paracelsus explains the failure of mere knowledge, because

"In my own heart love had not been made wise
To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of love's
To see a good in evil and a hope
In ill-success."

And his awakening consists in the recognition that man's true end is that devotion to other souls which henceforth he calls "love."

"Love, hope, fear, faith — these make humanity."

This, then, is Browning's final solution of life's problem. Man's good is found in the active exercise of all his powers for a worthy end ; and since no end is worthy of his efforts which is lower than himself, or less than personal, therefore devotion to persons, divine or human, good or bad, in other words, love, is " God's secret " of a happy life.

" There is no good of life but love — but love !
What else looks good is some shade flung from love.
Love gilds it, gives it worth. Be warned by me,
Never you cheat yourself one instant ! Love,
Give love, ask only love, and leave the rest."

" For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless God
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say."

" For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear, — believe the aged friend, —
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been, indeed, and is ;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth ; that is all."

" Love," however, is a word with such sentimental associations that a little digression is here necessary, in order to show what a profound philosophy and what a resolute temper are included in the virile and robust attitude of mind and heart which Browning indicates, as Jesus and Paul had done before him, by this word " love."

Everything, every situation is made up of many elements. These elements are in themselves neither good

nor bad, but indifferent. When an element so takes its place and performs its function as to conform to the idea and promote the end of the whole of which it is a part, then that element becomes good. When, on the other hand, an element gets out of place, and resists the purpose of the whole to which it properly belongs, then it becomes bad. Good, therefore, is fitness; badness is unfitness.

Now, the fundamental law of nature, or natural selection, as it is called, allows only the survival of the fittest. All that is unfit is by virtue of its unfitness already on the high road to extinction. The best always wins in the struggle for existence. The struggle is keen and cruel often; but the outcome is bound to be the survival of the fittest. Optimism, of this robust fighting kind, is written into the very constitution of the universe. The opposite of this principle, the permanent survival and triumph of the unfit, is simply inconceivable. A world in which everything was unfit, every particle arrayed in hopeless antagonism to every other, would be not a cosmos, but a chaos. On the inorganic plane evil is absolutely impossible. In organic life it first enters in the form of disease; which is nothing but the refusal of some part of an organism to fulfil the function assigned to it by the law of the organism. If this disease assumes too great proportions, nature simply wipes it out, taking the organism with it, by the swift, sure, merciless, but beneficent messenger of death. It is better that the diseased animal should die quickly, and give its room and food to a sound and healthy organism which stands ready to take its place. Thus the beneficence of natural selection, even though swift death be its chosen agency, is clear and unmistakable.

A more real form of evil enters when two organisms compete with each other, as in the preying of one animal upon another; or when organic and inorganic forces come into collision, as when an earthquake destroys a town, or a storm destroys a ship's crew. Yet even here there is a bright as well as a dark side. The side which wins has its interests which live and triumph, as well as the side which is defeated and slain. And the survivor is conscious of his joy, while the vanquished has at most but a moment of physical pain. President Eliot has set this forth in his lecture on "The Happy Life": "We must be sure to give due weight in our minds to the good side of every event which has two sides. A fierce northeaster drives some vessels out of their course, and others upon the ruthless rocks. Property and life are lost. But that same storm watered the crops upon ten thousand farms, or filled the springs which later will yield to men and animals their necessary drink. A tiger springs upon an antelope, picks out the daintiest bits from the carcass, and leaves the rest to the jackals. We say, Poor little antelope! We forget to say, Happy tiger! fortunate jackals! who were seeking their meat from God, and found it."

It is not until we come to human life and human society that we get evil in its worst forms. Here, however, evil is still unfitness, maladjustment. It is the refusal of a part to take its place and perform its function in the whole to which it belongs. For we are all parts of society; members of one another. All moral evil, call it vice, sin, or what you please, is the refusal of a member to act as if he were a member. Avarice, lust, cruelty, envy, pride, lying, stealing; they are all so many different ways in which a man who is capable of

appreciating the rights and claims of his fellow, refuses to recognize them; tramples on them; gets his own little pleasure, no matter how much misery and shame and degradation it brings to others. In other words, all sin is intentional unfitness. It is lack of love; lack, that is, of considerate regard and generous devotion to the good of other people besides one's self. Hence, when Browning tells us that love is the remedy for all the evils in the world, and is the one only good, he is telling us precisely what Jesus and Paul tell us in gospel and epistle; he is telling us precisely what a sound moral philosophy everywhere proclaims.

This shows us how evil is a reality, which we must fight with all our might; and at the same time a negation which is bound to be overcome. It shows how evil never can be complete, triumphant, eternal. The best figure for it that I know is that of a hole in the side of a boat. From one point of view the hole is a momentous reality. If not stopped it will sink the boat and drown the crew. You must concentrate all your efforts on stopping it at once. At the same time, the hole is from another point of view negative. It is the absence of the material that ought to be there. It is unfitness. It could not ever set up on its own account as something positive. It could not ultimately triumph, and take the place of the boat altogether. A boat that should be all hole, nothing but hole, would be no boat at all. So a man who should be all bad would be no man at all. Badness can fasten on to men, and work fearful havoc in them; but you can no more erect badness into a positive and permanent principle than you could make a boat all holes. When the poets try to make a devil, they have to put enough good qualities into him to float

the bad ones. Milton's Satan is a strenuous, resolute, ambitious fellow, whom in many respects we can't help admiring. A perfect devil, wholly bad, without a spark of goodness in him, is as impossible to conceive as a boat all hole and nothing but hole. A world wholly given over to the bad is as inconceivable as a shadow where there is no light; as universal debt in a community which has no property and no credit.

Evil is real, and has fearful consequences; we must fight it with all our might. That is half the truth. Evil is negative; sure to be ultimately conquered as often as it dares to show its head. That is the other half of the truth. To hold these two halves of the truth together, fighting in all the energy of the one, resting in the serenity of the other, is the true art of optimism.

The world is full of evils. Paint them as black as you please. Make the outward circumstance as barren as the grammarian's; hard and cruel as Pompilia's; coarse and vulgar as Fifine's: if love be there it will illumine and glorify the barrenness, soften the hardness, purify the coarseness and vulgarity. The very condemnation of the evil is the unimpeachable witness of the inherent supremacy and ultimate victory of the good. Evil exists to be condemned and conquered; and to bring out the soul's strength in the conquest over it. As Browning, going to the very verge of metaphysical and moral heresy, if not quite over it, exclaims, "That's what all the blessed evil's for." Whether that is what evil is for or not, at any rate that is the use strong men always make of it. President Eliot, in his lecture on "The Happy Life," says: "Human society is riddled with mischiefs and wrongs, some, like Armenian massacres, due to surviving savagery, and some, like slums, to sickly civilization. It would seem im-

possible to wring satisfaction and considerate happiness from such evils. Yet that is just what men of noble nature are constantly doing. They fight evil, and from the contest win content, and even joy. Nobody has any right to find life uninteresting, or unrewarding, who sees within the sphere of his own activity a wrong which he can help to remedy, or within himself an evil which he can hope to overcome." There is Browning's optimism, translated into plain prose by as practical and forceful, and unsentimental a man as the Anglo-Saxon race has produced. We all come under its sweeping terms. For who is there among us who can see in home or school, or society, or business, or church, or state, no wrong which he can help to remedy? Who can find within his own breast no selfishness, or envy, or pride, or cowardice, or weakness, or wickedness, which he can hope to overcome? That is the stuff a manly, robust optimism must be wrought out of, if it is gained at all. Have n't we in our view of life been taking the passive attitude? Have n't we been waiting for good to come to our homes and our politics, our industrial and social conditions, ready-made? And is not our pessimism about the world based on the obvious fact that good never comes that way? Have n't we been waiting to see spontaneous virtue spring up within our hearts? and is n't our despair and discouragement about ourselves due to the fact that we have taken this attitude of idle expectation and passive waiting for something to happen to us which can never happen at all, but must be wrought out by us, each for himself? If we wait for ready-made good to come to the world without or to our souls within, with "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin," we shall wait forever, and be pessimists to the end of time. If we attack life strenuously, seeing in

hate the challenge to a love strong enough to conquer it ;
and in pain a sting to a joy intense enough to swallow it ;
and in moral evil a call to battle against it, and the
promise of victory over it, then we shall find the world
a glorious place to live and die in, we shall be optimists
forevermore. We shall be, like Luitolpho,

“ The proper
Friend-making, everywhere friend-finding soul,
Fit for the sunshine ? So it followed him.
A happy-tempered bringer of the best
Out of the worst.”

We shall say with the poet, each for himself :

“ My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched ;
That after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched ;
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once prove accurst.”

Even in the face of the baseness and brutality of life
we can exclaim :

“ Partake my confidence ! No creature's made so
mean
But that, some way, it boasts, could we investigate,
Its supreme worth fulfils by ordinance of fate,
Its momentary task gets glory all its own,
Tastes triumph in the world, preëminent, alone.”

Towards sin, the hardest, cruelest fact of all, we shall
ask :

“Is not God now i’ the world His power first made ?
Is not his love at issue still with sin,
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth ?”

This conquering power of love is the key-note of Browning’s religion. According to Browning, love is God, service is the Son of God, courage is the Spirit of God; and so far and so often as these great qualities come into human life, God becomes therein reincarnated, “blending the quality of man with the quality of God.” And as far and as often as that comes to pass, the triumph of good over evil is accomplished, and the divinity and supremacy of love established on the throne of the moral universe.

To Browning’s thought, God is not the miraculous deliverer of the weaklings and the sentimentalists out of all their troubles, but the strong helper of those who strenuously strive to help themselves. If you have been able to work good out of these finite conditions, then and not otherwise the promise of the Infinite is yours. Hence it is with the confidence with which a brave soldier turns to a powerful ally that Browning looks up to God.

“Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable
Name ?
Builder and maker, Thou, of houses not made with
hands !
What, have fear of change from Thee who art ever the
same ?
Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy Power
expands ?
There shall never be one lost good ! What was, shall live
as before ;

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound ;
What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much
good more ;
On the earths the broken arcs ; in the heaven, a perfect
round.

“ All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good, shall
exist ;
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good, nor
power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too
hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
Enough that he heard it once ; we shall hear it by-and-
by.”

Having given rules for the art of pessimism, I suppose
I ought to be equally explicit in regard to optimism. I
will here again adopt the easily rememberable form in
which the rules for pessimism were cast. Indeed, the
rules for optimism are simply the inverse of the rules
for pessimism.

Live in the active voice ; intent on what you can do
rather than on what happens to you : in the indicative
mood ; concerned with facts as they are rather than as
they might be : in the present tense ; concentrated on the
duty in hand, without regret for the past or worry about
the future : in the first person ; criticising yourself rather
than condemning others : in the singular number ; seek-

ing the approval of your own conscience rather than popularity with the many. And since you must have some verb to serve as a paradigm, Browning tells us we can't do better than to take the very word the old grammars taught us—the verb *amo*, I love. Only we must be sure that our love is no soft sentimental affair which we go off in a corner to enjoy alone, but the spirit of brave and generous devotion to every human claim and tie. Whoever lives the life of such unselfish devotion to the good of others and of all, and lives it in the active voice, indicative mood, present tense, first person, singular number, is bound to find his life full and rich and glad and free; is bound, in other words, to be an optimist.

As toward life and duty, toward God and men, so finally toward death and the world beyond, Browning maintains the militant, active, triumphant air. In concluding our brief study of his optimism, we cannot do better than to contrast Browning's farewell to this world and greeting to the world to come with the next best thing that has been said about it in modern times—Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." In Tennyson's poem you have perfection of form, and all the twilight atmosphere of wistfulness, and in the figure of the tide,

"When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home,"

one of the grandest figures ever employed to symbolize the relation of the finite to the Infinite.

Yet, after all, the attitude is relatively passive; his God is outside and beyond, rather than with him and in him here and now, and therefore bound to go with him as a conquering Spirit, always and everywhere. Tenny-

son, to use his own phrase, "faintly trusts the larger hope," and trust and hope are always beautiful. Yet great as are faith and hope, they are not as great as the in-dwelling love that carries assurance and confidence within its own breast, and knows its own inherent power to quell and conquer anything that earth or heaven or hell could bring against it. You get a touch of it here and there to be sure in Tennyson, as in the "Ulysses," the "Ode on Wellington," and the opening passages of "In Memoriam." But on the whole Tennyson represents the faith in a transcendent rather than an immanent God; and to that faith the highest note of confidence, the clearest ring of a victorious optimism, is almost sure to be wanting. It is the one thing we miss in those otherwise magnificent verses of the great Laureate,

"CROSSING THE BAR.

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me !
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea.

"But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

"Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark !
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark.

“For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.”

That is inexpressibly beautiful; yet it is in spirit not so very far beyond what the average man attains. It is the greatest of anything born of woman; this serene and simple trust in a Power outside us and beyond us, which will, in ways we cannot understand, take care of us when we have passed beyond this bourne of time and space. Yet as Jesus said about John the Baptist: He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than the greatest of those who stand outside and prophesy its coming; so the power to carry the very spirit of the kingdom within one’s self, so that he could make even a hell into a heaven by the light of love he would shed abroad throughout it, were he ever banished there, is the greatest note of modern philosophic intuition and spiritual insight.

This deeper note of the invincible, conquering power of the love within his own breast we get in Browning’s “Epilogue.” Browning, here, as everywhere, must needs imply a situation, and introduce a third party, to give dramatic setting to his words. His poem addresses the fond friends whom he will leave behind, some of whom may be so foolish and mistaken as to mourn for him as for one whom some sad misfortune has overtaken, and even to pity him on account of this calamity; do, in short, what Socrates reproved Crito for doing, and what, unless forewarned, we should all be tempted to do for one we loved, but whose spiritual greatness we had been unable to understand. Browning’s “Epilogue” is a gentle re-

proof to these fond but mistaken friends, and the assurance to them, and to all the world, that a soul which has once learned to live in the active exercise of love can never be conquered or cast down in this world, or in any other. I once heard the poem from the lips of one of the few men worthy to repeat it: from Nansen, in answer to the question, "What is the good of all this risk of exploration, when one might be quite comfortable at home?" It is the great battle-song of spiritual exploration; the shout of triumph of victorious optimism. I am sure that the reading of this in close connection with those exquisite lines of Tennyson will show wherein Browning differs from the very best and highest that modern faith has reached; and that, compared to a soul which carries within itself the victorious principle of the divine love, even the sweetest hope, and the serenest faith, is "as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine."

Without further introduction, the poem shall speak for itself:

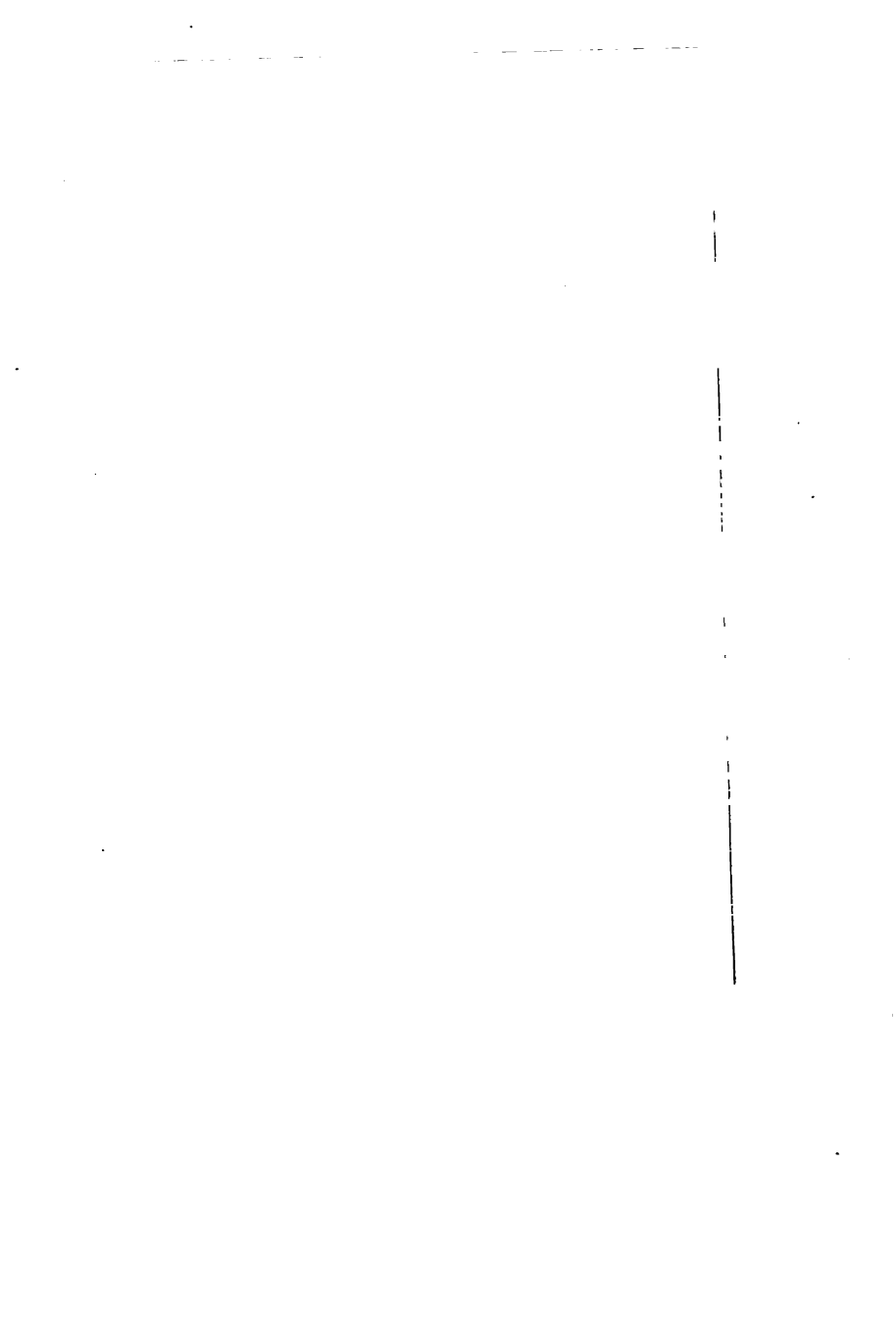
"EPILOGUE.

"At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,
When you set your fancies free,
Will they pass to where — by death, fools think, imprisoned —
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so,
— Pity me ?

"Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken !
What had I on earth to do
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly ?
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel
— Being — who ?

“ One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

“ No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time
Greet the unseen with a cheer !
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,
‘ Strive and thrive ! ’ cry ‘ Speed, — fight on, fare ever
There as here ! ’ ”





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